In 2005, Shari Kurzrok was sailing through life with a flourishing career in public relations and wedding bells on the horizon. Then came the storm. While celebrating the Fourth of July, she felt a twinge of pain in her abdomen. Over the next 10 days, she grew so weak that she could barely walk the block and a half to her doctor’s office. Tests suggested a liver problem, but her doctor wasn’t overly concerned. Get some rest, he told her, and you’ll be fine. That evening, Shari collapsed at home. Paramedics whisked her to a nearby hospital, where her family was stunned to learn that her liver was failing and she needed a transplant as soon as possible.

Kurzrok was transferred to the Mary Lea Johnson Richards Organ Transplant Center at NYU Langone Medical Center and listed as “Status 1” on the national transplant waiting list, meaning that she probably wouldn’t survive longer than a week. Days, then weeks, passed with no donor in sight. NYU Langone’s transplant team, experts in stretching time, kept Kurzrok alive with plasma exchanges and dialysis treatments, which cleared the toxins from her blood. But as August approached, her brain began to swell, a sign that time was running out. “That’s usually what kills patients with acute liver failure—cerebral edema,” explains Lewis Teperman, MD, associate professor of surgery and director of transplant surgery. Dr. Teperman and his team perform about 50 liver transplants each year, with the highest survival rate of all the major transplant centers in New York City.

All the while, Kurzrok slipped in and out of consciousness. “The nurses did everything for me—they brushed my hair, gave me sponge baths, and helped position me in bed,” she recalls. “I was 31 years old and cared for like a baby.” On August 6, a suitable donor became available. Dr. Teperman and his team of specialists, a dozen strong, gathered in the OR to begin the complex process of removing Kurzrok’s diseased liver and replacing it with the donor organ, matching blood vessel for blood vessel. Even for such an experienced team, the procedure is never routine. “No two livers are exactly alike,” notes Dr. Teperman. He eventually determined that Kurzrok had Wilson’s disease, a rare genetic disorder in which excess copper accumulates in the liver. The first symptoms usually appear during adolescence. If detected early, the disease can be treated with medication. In some cases, however, it emerges without warning well into adulthood, after the liver has been irreparably damaged.

With a new liver, Kurzrok is essentially cured. But her life isn’t quite the same. To prevent her body from rejecting the organ, she is on lifelong immunosuppressant therapy, which can have significant side effects. Favorite indulgences, like eating sushi and sunbathing, are now forbidden. “These are small sacrifices for what I’ve been given,” she says. “I can breathe, I can walk, I can go to the movies and ride my bike. I’ve been given a second chance, and I don’t want to take that for granted.”

Kurzrok and her fiancé, Robby Schnall, were married in October 2005, as originally planned, with Dr. Teperman as a guest of honor. Local newspapers dubbed her “the miracle bride.” Another miracle occurred earlier this year. With assurances from her physicians that she could have a healthy baby and wouldn’t pass along her genetic condition, Kurzrok became pregnant. The only concern was that one of her medications was associated with birth defects. Dr. Teperman prescribed a substitute and saw her through several rejection episodes. A healthy baby girl, Alexis, arrived on August 3, three days short of the sixth anniversary of her mom’s lifesaving surgery. For their daughter’s middle name, Shari and Robby chose Nadia because in Russian it means “hope”—their way of honoring the donor.

Every August 6, Kurzrok takes a moment to give thanks for her good fortune. But that day also brings a touch of sadness—the reminder that it was a young woman’s death that gave her the gift of life. “An 18-year-old girl’s parents, during the most tragic time of their life, decided to donate their daughter’s organs,” says Kurzrok. “That’s the real miracle.”